Election Time: Lessons from Young Leaders

This is the first article in a series titled, "Election Time: Lessons from Young Leaders"

Voters in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, line up to cast their ballots on November 29, 2015. (© AP Images)

Lex Paulson is an attorney, professor, writer, and consultant in international governance. He's worked as a facilitator and trainer for NGOs in Uganda, Burundi, Niger, Ghana, Congo-Brazzaville, Benin, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, on issues related to democratic engagement and accountable government.

The election was going to be too close to call. The mood at campaign headquarters — "headquarters" being too grand a word; it was just a simple apartment — was anxious. Our candidate, energetic and eloquent, may have been more anxious than any of us. We knew he hadn't slept for three nights before Election Day. We had worked so hard and earned the support of so many voters — but what if they stayed home, or changed their minds? What would we do if our opponent, that career politician with the "trust me" grin, won the election? Would all our work go to waste?

This was the story of my first campaign, but it could be your story too. Elections are a time when a community makes big decisions, and these decisions can bring out the best and the worst in us. I've helped train young activists in Benin and Egypt, worked with political journalists in Uganda and small-business owners in Côte d'Ivoire, and led a national evaluation of election monitors in Guinea. As different as these countries are from one another, at election time I recognize the exact same emotions — nervousness, hopefulness, excitement, doubt — that I felt as a 19-year-old on that city-council campaign in New Haven, Connecticut.

As a professor now at the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris (called "Sciences Po" for short), my students and I have the privilege of teaming up with the Young African Leaders Initiative Network in 2016 to explore the challenges that face us during election season. How can young people help ensure that elections are fair and peaceful? How can they bring their own ideas — even surprising and new ones — into the political debate? How can we mobilize our communities to get educated about politics and show up on Election Day? How do we ready ourselves for the work after Election Day, win or lose?

Elections can be full of anxiety and frustration, but so too can they bring out our better angels. Campaigns get us out into the community to meet new people, learn about their lives, and debate together how we can make change. We form teams, work hard and find new skills we didn't know we had before. And in the process, new leaders can come out of the most unexpected places. You may be one of them.

In the months ahead, we at Sciences Po will be sharing stories and lessons from all over the world as we engage with you on these powerful questions in a series titled, "Election Time: Lessons from Young Leaders." We look forward to discussing and debating them with the entire YALI community.

Together I think we can bring the promise of democracy — with all its frustrations and faults — another step closer to reality.

Want to read more articles from the, "Election Time: Lessons from Young Leaders" series? Please find them here:

Want More Young People to Vote? Go Online

When Enough Is Enough: Urban Guerilla Poetry

Want to Energize Young Voters? Look Beyond Elections

Sobel Aziz Ngom (Courtesy photo)

In the run-up to Senegal's 2012 elections, Sobel Aziz Ngom and his friends mounted a voter education campaign that combined social media, print, television and one-on-one outreach. For all the positive effect the campaign had, Ngom came away thinking he had defined the problem he was trying to solve too narrowly.

"The main challenge," Ngom said, "is not how to mobilize youth to vote, but how to make them citizens first." While most of the people he is working to reach were born into citizenship, Ngom sees true citizenship as something different: "Citizenship is something you build and cultivate." Ngom says what matters even more than whether or not youth vote is why they vote. "Most of them are voting because people give them T-shirts or money or promise them things. They don't really understand all the implications of a vote." The main challenge today, he believes, is to activate this sense of citizenship. Being a citizen, he said, "is not just voting every five years — it's more than that. If you want to understand the issues of your country, you have to be more engaged in your local community and public affairs."

Ngom thinks social media offers an important opportunity for candidates and leaders to communicate with youth. He just wishes they used it better. "They don't understand the 'social' in 'social media,'" he said. "They're just announcing information, and you never know if they even read the comments." Recently, he met with a government minister to encourage him to take advantage of social media. "Many people are doing good work that aligns with your policies," he reported telling the official. "You have to know who they are and how to interact with them."

In Senegal, Ngom believes, young people's ability to understand the importance of their vote and the duties of citizenship is undercut by too little knowledge of their own nation's history. "In school, what we learn in class is the Cold War and the World War II," he said. "We learn three or four African heroes from 200 years ago, but we don't know where we are coming from in the last century.

It’s hard to build your citizenship or have a feeling of belonging if you don’t know what you belong to.”

Take the YALI Network Online Course “Understanding Elections and Civic Responsibility” to learn, among other things, what your vote means and the responsibilities that come with it.

Snowflakes in Niger

Adrienne Lever discussing civic engagement in Niamey in November 2015. (Courtesy photo)

Adrienne Lever didn’t bring much experience to Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. “I graduated [from] Berkeley, got in my car and drove to a campaign office,” Lever says of her 23-year-old self. “I just worked as a volunteer until they hired me.” She ended up as a regional director for field programs in seven states, and has focused her work on activism and community organizing ever since.

Lever took what she learned from her on-the-ground work for the president’s campaign and now helps community leaders who want to effect change.

Recently, Lever traveled to Niger to talk to groups of women and young people in Niamey, Dosso and Tillabéry. In these gatherings, she discussed civic engagement before, during and after elections. She also gave a lecture at the University of Niamey about what she’d learned from the 2008 Obama campaign.

“The strength in grass-roots mobilization comes from a spirit of volunteerism,” said Lever, “from engaging people around the issues that they care about and talking to young people about things that are going to touch their lives.”

Adrienne Lever (Courtesy photo)

She said that in many countries in Africa she’s visited, “there’s a broad frustration that young people don’t have a voice because no one will elect them.” The lesson of American campaigns she’s worked on is that “nobody gets involved in a campaign or activity around politics because they think they’re going to end up being a member of Congress. They do it because they believe in a cause, because there’s something they want to change in the world or their community. That’s the spirit of participation that campaigns in the U.S. use to engage young people, by showing them that there is an impact for them, that it’s not just about what’s happening in the White House.”

Among the tools she urged her Nigerien audiences to employ to maximize their networks’ effectiveness was the snowflake model of organizing. First articulated by longtime organizer and

Harvard professor Marshall Ganz, the snowflake model replaces a single leader in a network with interconnected leaders, each responsible for an aspect of a campaign. In this model, Ganz says, leadership is a practice and not a position.

In the example below, the dark blue figures represent regional organizers who each interact with two green figures (representing community coordinators), who each interact with five community members (light blue).

An illustration of the snowflake model of community organizing, in which a single leader is replaced with interconnected leaders. (State Dept./Doug Thompson)

“People — and not just around election cycles — have been able to find power in building numbers by talking to people one person at a time,” said Lever. “By working on changing one heart and mind you build an exponential power base, and that’s how you change your environment and your world, ultimately.”

What Do You Need to Know to Run a City?

(© AP Images)

The campaign's finished, the election's over and, congratulations, you're the new mayor. But how much do you know about creating a city budget or navigating the relationships among your governmental agencies? Running a city day to day — and running it smoothly — comes with a learning curve. Depending on their experience, newly elected leaders can find themselves gobsmacked by what it takes.

That's why, since 1975, Harvard University has hosted its "Seminar on Transition and Leadership for Newly Elected Mayors." The university's Institute of Politics, in conjunction with the U.S. Conference of Mayors, invites mayors-elect of large and small cities across the U.S. for the intensive three-day seminar. The 23 participants from December's seminar came from cities in 18 states, including Pennsylvania, Tennessee, California and Alaska.

"Some of them have been police chiefs and know everything about a police department," said Christian Flynn, who directs the program, "and some were small-business owners who never thought about the police department."

Flynn consults with Harvard faculty and the Conference of Mayors about what should be on the agenda each year. Additions to this year's agenda included "Policing and Public Safety" and "Attracting the Millennial Generation to Your City."

Recently elected mayors who participated in December's seminar for newly elected mayors at Harvard University. (Courtesy photo)

Finance experts and the sitting mayors of Baltimore and Miami, as well as journalists from the New York Times and CNN, spoke to the new mayors. Workshops covered setting priorities for the first 100 days in office, policing, communicating during a crisis and developing local economies.

Flynn is quick to point out that the program is nonpartisan and that Harvard — rather than any government or corporate or special interest — pays for it.

Alison Silberberg, the new mayor of Alexandria, Virginia, picked up some advice from the police commissioner of Boston, William Evans. “He told me to be careful about all the ‘toys’ for policing people want you to buy as a new mayor,” she said. He suggested that instead of spending money that could strain the city’s budget, Silberberg should get police officers out of their cars and away from the desks and into the community to build trust with citizens.

During the seminar, mayors-elect stay in the same hotel and eat their meals together. “There was a remarkable sharing of ideas, not just from the experts, but from all the mayors: ‘We have that problem in Nashville, let me tell you what we did,’” Silberberg said.

She has already acted on many recommendations from the seminar. “Mayor [Marty] Walsh of Boston recommended I have a public safety meeting on day one, which was a great idea, and I did it. Well, I did it on day two because the chief of police was out of town.”

Flynn dreams of a lengthier seminar, but said that “because of [the mayors’] schedules, it can be hard to get them for the three days. I wish I could get them for a month.”

What do your elected officials need to know to serve effectively, and how are they getting that important information? Take the YALI Network Online Course “Understanding Elections and Civic Responsibility” to learn, among other things, about engaging with candidates and elected officials.

Online learning spurs offline climate action

(Courtesy Aishat Hussain-Agberemi)

How do you transform online energy into offline action? It helps to have an important subject and an engaged network of community leaders.

The YALI Network is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), an effort by President Obama to encourage young African adults to become active in business, community organizing and public management.

The network, with its 200,000 members across sub-Saharan Africa, makes online resources available to young Africans who want to make positive change in their communities and countries.

At the end of November, with the hashtag #YALIGoesGreen, the network began a campaign that bridged online enthusiasm and on-the-ground action. The campaign challenged YALI Network members to share their stories on the YALI Network Facebook page, Twitter, and social media of how climate change affects their communities and to earn a certificate with the three-part YALI Network Online Course "Understanding Climate Change."

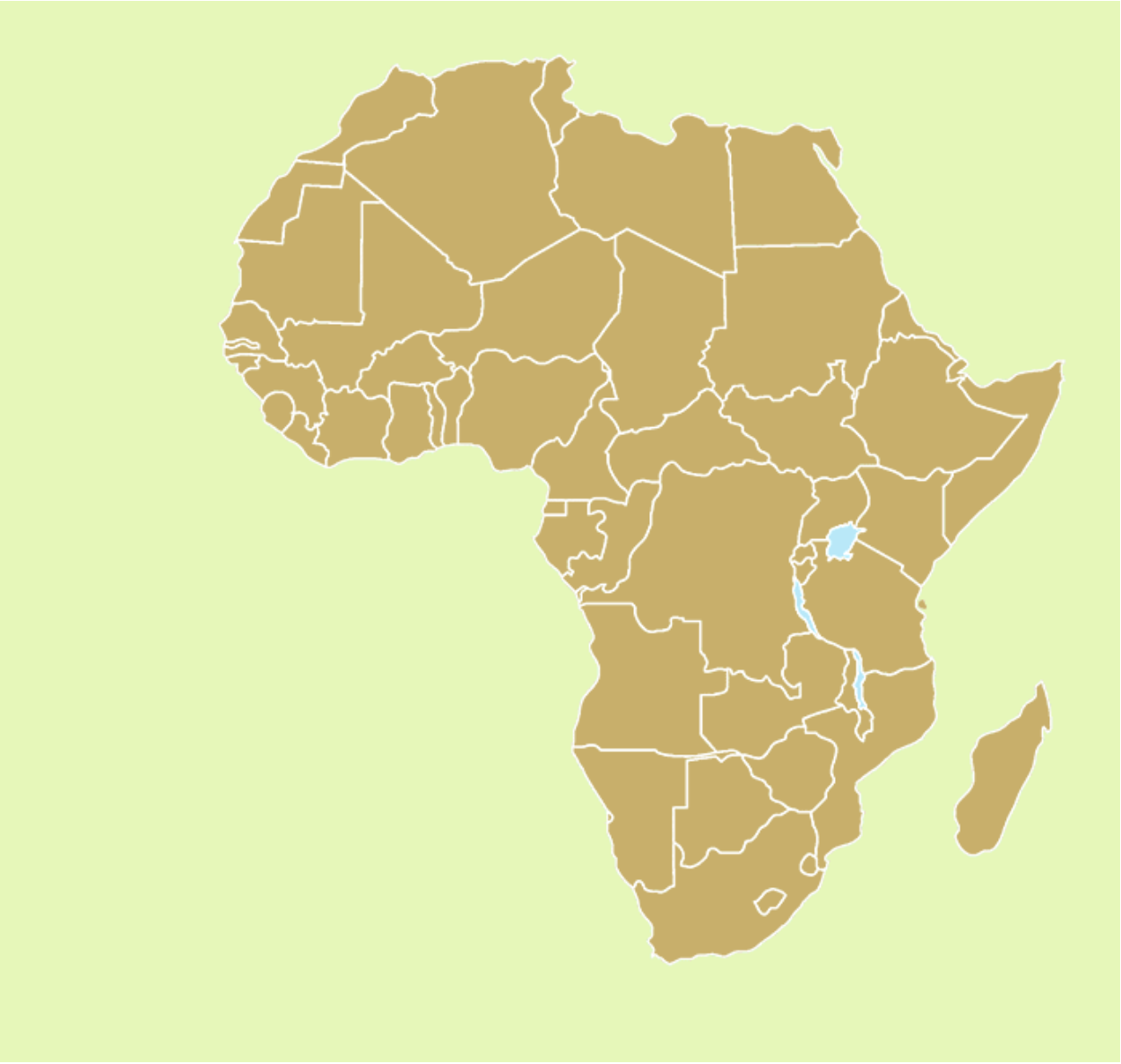
Things really got interesting with the challenge to become a "Green Champion" by hosting a #YALILearns event using the course's discussion and activity guide. Throughout December, network members all over sub-Saharan Africa sent feedback and pictures of events they hosted in their communities and schools.

David Mboko Mavinga introduced 35 students at Notre Dame de la Providence secondary school in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, to the science of climate change and discussed with them

everyday ideas for taking action. The event was important, Mavinga said, “because we speak about climate change on the radio, the television and in newspapers, but very few people speak about it in daily life.”

In Accra, Ghana, Temitope Amujo offered an event he called “Sustainable Climate Actions: From Reactions to Actions” for a gathering of 24 local professionals just before the Paris climate summit at the start of December.

By the end of January, the YALI Network reported over-the-top results, having turned an important online discussion into real action.



Rock the Vote: Harnessing the Power of Young Voters

E. J. Johnson (left) and Ireland Baldwin dance their way to a voting booth in a Rock the Vote video. (Courtesy photo)

When young people vote, they can decide elections. It happened in Nigeria and Burkina Faso in 2015. It happened in the U.S. in 2008, when Barack Obama was first elected president.

If you want to learn how to get young people involved in elections, you probably should check out Rock the Vote. The organization has one goal: getting the youngest eligible voters in the U.S. to the polls. For 25 years, the nonprofit, nonpartisan organization has inspired young voters using pop culture, music, art and technology.

The backbone of Rock the Vote has been their emphasis on removing practical obstacles to voting — cutting through red tape to make it clear where young people need to go to register and when they need to do it.

“Our generation is the most connected and diverse generation ever,” said Rock the Vote’s president, Ashley Spillane. “We live online and on social media.” That’s why Rock the Vote delivers its messages online.

Rock the Vote president Ashley Spillane (right) with rapper Darryl McDaniels at a Rock the Vote event. (Courtesy photo)

It hasn't always been this way. When Rock the Vote started in 1990, it launched a television commercial featuring pop singer Madonna encouraging voting. More typical of today's efforts are the YouTube video in which rapper Lil Jon turns his hit "Turn Down for What" into "Turnout for What" or the video made by fashion model Kendall Jenner (with her mobile-phone camera) that nudges people to participate in National Voter Registration Day.

No matter who delivers the message, "the focus has to be on getting [youth] to channel their passion for issues into action and also letting them know how easily and efficiently they can vote," Spillane said.

A recent poll by Rock the Vote and USA Today found that in the U.S., the issues most important to Millennials (people born from the early 1980s to the early 2000s) are the economy and the need to convert to renewable energy. Spillane said Millennials do not identify strongly with political parties, but are passionate about issues. While they don't vote as much as older people — the reason Rock the Vote exists — "young people are much less cynical than people assume," Spillane said.

"Listen to them, and give them opportunities to voice their concerns," she said. "Demystify democracy and ramp up education about the political institutions that should be responsive to them."

One way to demystify democracy is to learn more about democratic institutions and the electoral process with the YALI Network's three-part online course Understanding Elections and Civic Responsibility. Take all three lessons, pass the quiz and earn a free YALI Network certificate.

What do Nelson Mandela, George Washington and an ancient Roman consul have in common?

by Scott Bortot

Nelson Mandela voluntarily stepped down after serving one presidential term. (© AP Images)

What do Nelson Mandela, George Washington and Roman statesman Cincinnatus have in common?

Each walked away from political power.

The contrast with dictators who cling to power for decades is obvious. And, says Michigan State University political scientist William B. Allen, leaving office voluntarily "amounts to a humble submission to the authority of the society above the ambition of the ruler … [and] an index of democratic character."

In 1999, when Nelson Mandela voluntarily stepped down after one term as South Africa's president, he followed in the footsteps of Roman statesman Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus (519–430 B.C.E.), who on two occasions renounced near-absolute emergency authority to return to his farm.

Two terms were enough for George Washington. (Courtesy photo)

The first president of the United States, George Washington, set a similar example when he declined to run for a third term — despite being urged to do so — declaring that two terms were enough for any president. (The U.S. Constitution was later amended to formalize a two-term limit.)

Peaceful transitions of power, adds George Washington University political scientist Michael Cornfield, contribute to a nation's political health.

Reformers in over 60 nations participate in the Open Government Partnership, an organization that works to make governments more transparent, more accountable and more responsive to their own citizens.

The United States honors the South African leader's legacy through the Mandela Washington Fellowships, the exchange program of the Young African Leaders Initiative that brings young African leaders to the U.S. for intensive executive leadership training, networking, and skills building, followed by a presidential summit in Washington, D.C.

There's No Value in Selling Your Vote

(State Dept./  Doug Thompson)

It's a familiar sight in many countries: rallies at which political candidates shower the crowd with T-shirts, food or gifts of cash. The practice has gone on in some parts of the world for centuries, the candidates thinking well-placed money will earn them loyalty at the ballot box.

Selling your vote makes for bad governance, encourages corruption and is very likely to keep some of the best potential candidates from running for office.

Nic Cheeseman of Oxford University said he has spoken to members of parliament in several African nations who say their peers are vulnerable to corruption because of what it costs to get elected. "And the elections can cost four or five times an MP's annual salary," said Cheeseman. "So election finance gets locked into a cycle of political corruption." This corruption prevents well-qualified people who can't afford to give away money from running for office.

"So long as [you, the voter] believe the ballot is secret," said Nic Cheeseman of Oxford University, "there's a strong incentive to take money from everybody and vote the way your conscience would have directed you anyway."

Professor Jenny Guardado backs this argument. A political scientist who teaches in Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, she points to the findings of Afrobarometer, a pan-African research organization. The researchers report that across sub-Saharan Africa, voters strongly believe their vote is secret. In African countries, Guardado said, "55 percent of those who got a handout got them from more than one party." Those people will vote their conscience or "use some other guidance," she said.

Trying to buy votes “perpetuates a form of politics in which leaders don’t feel they need to respond to the genuine concerns of the citizens,” said Nic Cheeseman. (© AP Images)

Why do candidates try to buy?

If you can’t really buy votes, why are candidates giving away money?

“I think candidates give out money not because they particularly think it’s a great way of winning an election, but because voters demand it,” Cheeseman said.

A lot of candidates see “buying votes” as an expensive, and ineffective, practice. But voters should wake up to the problems they create by taking the handouts. When candidates give away money, it is very likely to increase corruption by making officials beholden to people other than those they are supposed to serve.

Cheeseman offers advice to officials facing re-election: “If you can demonstrate that you built a school for your community, your community will turn out to vote for you much more than if you gave them small amounts of cash in the run-up to Election Day.”

Instead of taking cash from candidates, ask for commitments — specific promises of action for your community for which you can hold them accountable.

If you want to take a leadership role in improving your community, consider these tips for organizing volunteering events as well as Lex Paulson’s lesson “Engaging with Candidates and Elected Officials” in the online course Understanding Elections and Civic Responsibility.

Engaging African Youth in Sustainable Development Goals

As 2016 slowly takes shape, the world and many countries in Africa (including Tanzania) will start the journey to meet the new United Nations Sustainable Development Goals known as the "Global Goals". The 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) are a new, universal set of goals, targets and indicators that UN member states will be expected to use to frame their agendas and policies for the next 15 years.

The SDGs that came into effect on January 1st, 2016, follow and expand on the millennium development goals (MDGs), which were agreed by governments in 2001 and expired at the end of last year. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a global call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all human beings enjoy peace and prosperity.

For many African countries, poverty, political instability and environmental degradation are significant challenges to meeting the 17 ambitious global goals in just 15 years. However there's a genuine opportunity for African countries to reach these goals if African youth are informed and fully engaged in development programs that contribute to their achievement their own countries. Africa remains the youngest continent in the world, with 80 percent of its population under the age 24. Young Africans are an incredible resource toward achieving the UN-SDGs.

Why engage youth in SDGs: A View from Tanzania

Tanzania is the 13th largest country in Africa. Tanzania's population is quite young: As of 2014, 45 percent of the population was under the age of 15. It's the sixth most populated country in Africa, with 52.3 million people. By 2030 – only 14 years from now – the population is projected to rise to 79.4 million, and by 2050, unless the birth rate slows substantially, there will be 2.5 times as many people in Tanzania as there are today — 129.4 million — which would make it the 15th largest country in the world.

UN Tanzania Resident Coordinator Alvaro Rodriguez said, "For the first time, governments of all countries have agreed on a set of goals for everyone. These goals will help all nations and all people share prosperity, reduce poverty, and protect the planet from climate change. They will address the interconnected elements of sustainable development: economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection."

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Chief Economist for Tanzania speaking with invited delegates during the launching of Sustainable Development Goals in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Recognizing these challenges and the need to engage youth in sustainable development programs, TAYEN-Tanzania Youth Environmental Network, a nonprofit youth led organization mobilizes and engages youth across Tanzania to solve environmental and youth development challenges through community environmental action projects.

TAYEN programs involve tree planting to address deforestation and educating youth about the changing climate conditions that affect community livelihoods, particularly agriculture which is the country's economic backbone. Today, TAYEN has planted over 25,000 indigenous trees to combat deforestation, a number one environmental challenge. We've reached out to more than 5,000 young people, engaging them in community environmental-action projects to conserve and protect the country's rich natural resources and reduce poverty among rural communities across the Tanzania.

Youth in Tanzania have a big stake on the SDGs and if left out, the journey for achieving the Global Goals will be longer than expected. Towards the realization of SDGs, a priority and focus should be in strengthening in school and out of school youth participation so that young people better understand the SDGs, but more importantly, develop strong Youth-adult partnerships in all sustainable development programs that eventually lead to attainment of SDGs at all levels from village (community), national and global. Youth platforms like TAYEN and the YALI Network of Tanzania have huge role to design and implement youth-led community action projects that provide local solutions to sustainable challenges facing Tanzania and the globe.

TAYEN members in University of Dar es Salaam

TAYEN Youth members participating in one of Community Tree planting campaigns organized by TAYEN.

Term limits on presidents are a good thing. Here's why.

By Stephen Kaufman

The concept of "president-for-life" appeals to some people. But for most of us, term limits are a welcome check on authority.

President Obama likely will hear some supporters chant "Four more years!" at upcoming political events. But he won't take it seriously.

U.S. presidents haven't had the option to serve a third term since 1951. Even before that, most followed the example set by George Washington and never tried to stay in office for more than eight years.

South Africa's Nelson Mandela famously kept his promise to serve only one term, despite public pressure to change his mind.

Some argue that term limits violate the will of voters who support their current leader and want the leader to continue, even if that would mean revising their country's constitution. However, history has shown that term limits strengthen democratic institutions over the long term and help ensure peaceful political transition.

Because of term limits:

- Incumbents are less able to use the state's institutions to manipulate elections or erode the power of rival branches of government and political adversaries.
- Leaders feel more pressure to deliver results and leave office with a positive legacy.
- Individuals, no matter how powerful and popular, cannot become indispensable.
- Political transitions are normal, regular, predictable events, so rival parties have little incentive to upset the system through coups or other means.
- The need to change leadership encourages a rising generation of political leaders, fresh ideas and possible policy changes.

It sounds like a paradox, but even as term limits prevent a popular president from remaining in office, they promote the healthy competition needed to strengthen democratic institutions and the democratic process.

You can learn more about democratic institutions and the electoral process with the YALI Network's three-part online course Understanding Elections and Civic Responsibility. Take all three lessons, pass the quiz and earn a free YALI Network certificate.